

No Hunger for Heroes

By Senator Ben Hueso

Hunger is a serious problem in America today. Due to the Great Recession, and slower-than-expected economic recovery, approximately 50 million people nationwide – including one in five children – regularly struggle against hunger.

While hunger is a travesty in any family, it is especially disconcerting to see the number of hungry veterans and families of active-duty personnel. In 2011, approximately 1.5 million veterans, living in households with a net income below the federal poverty level, received food assistance. According to the United States Department of Agriculture, more than \$100 million in food stamps were redeemed at military commissary stores in 2012.

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), referred to as CalFresh in California, provides food assistance to low-income families, including low-income veteran and military families. Since San Diego County has more veterans returning from the Iraq and Afghanistan wars than any other county in the nation, and has seen no relief in its high unemployment rates, it is essential that we protect and strengthen the SNAP program as well as correct administrative barriers that limit access. This is why I authored SB 134, the No Hunger for Heroes Act, signed by Governor Brown, which increases food security for California's veterans.

In particular, SB 134 prevents counties from denying food assistance to unemployed veterans and instructs counties to refer veterans to their local county veterans service officers (CVSO) and other veterans' assistance and job training agencies. Through these referrals, out-of-work veterans are more likely to receive support. These agencies provide mental health and other services, facilitate access to federally funded veteran re-training programs, and reduce the need for county administered assistance programs.

SB 134 is California's contribution towards a necessary safety-net for veterans and their families as they return to a slowly recovering economy. Regrettably, even with this in place many returning military personnel will still find themselves unable to work due to injuries sustained during their service. In addition, delays in the federal Veterans Administration's process of determining disabilities will cause many veterans to wait, sometimes up to a year, without the ability to work and/or without access to disability benefits. For these veterans, the SNAP program may be the only option saving them from chronic hunger.

A recent vote at the federal level to cut \$40 Billion to SNAP benefits over the next 10 years threatens the effectiveness of SB 134. I am both thankful to and proud of our San Diego Members of Congress Juan Vargas, Susan Davis and Scott Peters for standing strong against these cuts. I am further encouraged to see H.R. 2038, known as the Disabled Veterans Nutrition Fairness Act of 2013, recently introduced by Congressman Vargas and Congresswoman Jackie Speier, which would strengthen the ability of SNAP to respond to hunger among disabled veterans while their disability claims are pending with the VA office.

Hunger is an indignity no one should experience, especially not those who have risked their lives to serve our country. We need to continue building our defense against hunger and develop thoughtful policies that maximize support for our veterans. A recent report by the Little Hoover Commission validates the need for California to invest in ways that will allow us to effectively leverage federal dollars to benefit our veterans. As Chair of the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee, we have already begun working on these issues and will continue our efforts to ensure that returning veterans are welcomed home with opportunity and not hardship.

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Senator Ben Hueso represents California's 40th Senate District, which includes the cities of Chula Vista, National City, Imperial Beach, Coronado a portion of the City of San Diego, Imperial County, and the southern part of Riverside.